Baptism of Christ 2020

We are at the beginning of a new calendar year, and still quite early in the Church’s year that began with Advent Sunday on December 1st. It’s a year that cycles through exciting festivals and more mundane periods of ordinary time, marked by different coloured vestments and seasonal prayers, culminating with the feast of Christ the King next November before it all starts again.

There’s a lot that is good, healthy, and indeed rather beautiful about this way of inhabiting the story of our faith, with its regular reminders of important truths. Though if you have the feeling that there’s a ‘but’ coming, you’d be right. I’d like to offer two cautions: one practical and the other more theological.

First, we have to be careful to ensure that the liturgical year remains our servant and does not become our master. As Jesus said, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath.’ There is a real danger that the seasonal cycle that should feed us will turn into the hamster wheel on which we burn ourselves out. At this time of year it’s a good spiritual discipline for us – both as individuals and church communities to ask, is my life so driven by worthy activities and commitments that I have no time to stop, look up, and remember what it’s all about? To dare to consider dropping something.

The second caution connects with advice I regularly give to my students when I say ‘Don’t mistake the Church of England for the kingdom of God.’ And it’s this: ‘Don’t mistake the liturgical calendar for divine time.’

In our human earthbound way we have a natural tendency to see time as going along in a line or round in a circle. But experience shows us that God’s time is much less smooth – it’s about interrupting the flow and breaking the circle; it invites us to seize the window of opportunity to dwell in the now or to take the plunge. It’s about forcing us to stop, look up, and gain a different perspective. When the circle of bread is broken at Communion it’s a reminder not just of the broken body of Jesus but also of this dramatic breaking in of God into our everyday repetitive existence.

This is what happens at Jesus’ baptism. Jesus says, ‘Let it be so now!’ And then, we are told, God breaks in: the heavens are opened – or in the words of Ezekiel on which this passage is based – they are torn apart and Jesus gains a different – a heavenly, divine perspective.

In this morning’s Gospel Matthew grants us a glimpse of that heavenly perspective, but actually it is only Jesus to whom the heavens are opened, only Jesus who sees the Spirit and - by implication - only Jesus who hears the voice. This different reality is revealed only to him, not the bystanders.

These days, if you hear a voice that nobody else can hear it’s quite likely that you or those around you would question your sanity. And indeed we know this is exactly what happened to Jesus himself. But the fact is that hearing voices is not uncommon in the general population and it’s not necessarily a sign of mental illness.

One of the things that makes the difference is what the voice or voices are saying. Typically, in schizophrenia or severe depression the voice is cruel and critical. It talks about you, saying you are unloved, stupid, ugly, worthless, that your situation is hopeless, that the world would be better off without you. It’s the sort of discourse that is sadly mirrored in the hate-filled posts one can so easily find on social media these days.

But the voice that Jesus hears says the absolute opposite: ‘He is loved and well pleasing to me.’ And in this we see that not only is there a clash between divine and human time; there is a clash between the earthly and the heavenly perspective or – as Toby said so tellingly last week – earthly rulers don’t like heavenly power. For heavenly power is exercised through love, not by instilling fear and shame.

There has been quite a lot of research into what is happening in our brains when we hear voices that nobody else can hear. The research shows that we are drawing on our deep store of memories and habits to receive the message. In mental health conditions those memories may be of abusive parents, or harsh critical teachers, or just bad stuff that deep down we think about ourselves. But in benign conditions the memories may be more wholesome and the message more positive; drawn from the reassuring words of a beloved parent, comforting song lyrics or poetry, and - for the person of faith – Scripture.

Twice in my life, when quite upset I have heard a voice that spoke to me in the words of the Bible. The first time was back in 1990 when I was panicking just as I went into a job interview. This is what I heard:

‘do not fear, for I am with you,’ (Isaiah 41:10)

It powered me through the interview and, against all the odds, I got the job.

The second time was in 2012 when I very distressed that the Church of England had voted against women bishops; I was wondering if I should resign in protest, but then I heard a voice say

‘You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last,’ (John 15:16)

That one brought me up short and then brought me to my knees.

God can speak to us in many ways – through nature, the arts, or through other people, but on these occasions I believe he spoke directly to me through Scripture, his living word that points to the Eternal Word – Jesus. My familiarity with the Bible helped me to tune into his voice; it acted like a kind of receiver.

And this is what was happening with Jesus at his baptism. He didn’t hear random words or a totally new message. He heard Isaiah 42:1

‘Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.’

Jesus knew his Bible inside out. And, as the heavens were opened to him and God spoke, Jesus used his Bible to tune into the message. Yet, you will have spotted, what he hears is not an exact replica of Isaiah’s words; Jesus tunes in with the Bible but the Spirit takes him beyond it. Jesus is seen not to be God’s approved servant – wonderful as that would be – but God’s beloved Son.

This is the message – the joyful Good news - that Jesus goes on to preach; that through his sonship all human beings have the chance to realise our true status, in the words of John Chapter 1:

to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,

Following his revelation, we might think that Jesus would go straight out to preach this good news. But he doesn’t. First he goes into the wilderness; and here he does battle with another voice – one that is dark and seductive, one that suggests he is so special that he is entitled to exploit God, the planet, and its peoples, even to have a go at self-harm. And here Jesus again uses his Bible – this time the book of Deuteronomy – to fight back. Not as a source of proof texts to lob at the devil, but as a way to tune into his Father’s will, to hear that still small voice of love, to rest in it, and to right himself.

What does this have to say to us? I think it reminds us of the importance of reading our Bibles, of going further and learning the odd verse or even whole chunks off by heart. There are several group initiatives across the parish and benefice that can support us in this – just look at the ESP booklet. But as individuals it would do us no harm this year to take the odd verse that has spoken to us and resolve to learn it by heart.

This will help us to tune into – to receive - God now, perhaps exceptionally through an audible voice; more usually through the metaphorical voice of our inner thoughts and reflections. What’s more it will be food for our future life journey, a resource which will nourish us in times of trial or when our memories, hearing, or vision start to fail. For as Jesus said, when he wrestled alone with his dark voices:

Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"